

CORRECTED INTERVIEW

Interview with DIANE LEWIS Interviewed by Betty King

Diane Lewis is Co-Principal and Executive Vice President of ALTA Consulting Group, Inc., Washington, D.C., a management consulting firm, with extensive experience in health care policy, and community development.

Ms. Lewis' professional experience spans over 35 years of work in government and the private sector as an employee, and entrepreneur. Ms. Lewis has worked to extend the reach and effectiveness of health systems in underserved/under resourced communities. Ms. Lewis directs collaborative efforts to improve the effectiveness of health systems and has worked with the non-profit community and foundations to expand health care access and women's health, develop workforce development strategies, advocate for and inform public policy.

Ms. Lewis is currently, Chair of the Board, DC Health Benefit Exchange Authority (DC HBX). DC HBX serves as the health insurance marketplace where residents and small businesses have access to comprehensive, affordable health insurance. Ms. Lewis is also on the Board of the HSC Foundation, National Youth Transition Center – a collaborative learning community to benefit youth with disabilities and returning veterans.

Ms. Lewis is a graduate of the City College of New York (B.A. Economics) and the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, Princeton University (MPA).

July 25, 2016

BK: Say something into the microphone to get the right – anything. Just say anything.

DL: Anything. This is Diane Lewis to be interviewed today on oral history.

BK: That's great. Today is July 25th, 2016. My name is Betty King, and I'm interviewing Diane Lewis. Diane, when did you come to Washington?

DL: 1971.

BK: And did you come here for a specific job?

DL: Actually, I came here to go to law school. I was accepted at Georgetown Law School and attended law school, and in my last year started working for DC Public Schools.

BK: That was what, 1974?

DL: So that's '74. Marion's on the board.

BK: Was chair of the board, wasn't he?

DL: And he was chair of the board and he had, toward the end of that year – so I started working in '74.

BK: That was the year of the election for the first city council?

DL: Council, and he leaves shortly thereafter. I guess maybe I was there maybe a half a year working for the school board, and he leaves to go to the City Council

BK: So you met him when you went to work for the school –

DL: For the school board, right.

BK: And did you work on his campaign in '74?

DL: For the city council, no, because, if you worked for the school board in those days, you couldn't engage in political activity.

BK: Okay. The teachers could, but the non-teaching employees could not?

DL: Yeah, right.

BK: Did you do anything for him in '78 for the campaign?

DL: Yes, I worked with a number of groups that supported – that were involved in the campaign around that time, so yes.

BK: And were you still working for the school board?

DL: I had changed positions at that point, and so I was able to –

BK: You were unhatched? [n longer subject to the Hatch Act which bars federal and some DC employees from political activities.]

DL: Yeah, so I was then able to, because that period was an elected school board period. We had not yet moved to the point at which we had either that – the school board and school system were under the mayor. So, we had a freestanding independent agency and an elected school board.

BK: Okay. You were not deeply involved in the campaign, but you helped in the campaign; is that right to say?

DL: Absolutely, yeah.

BK: Now then, during transition, did you come over to transition? When did you come into the government?

DL: I came into the government when I was appointed as a special assistant to the mayor for education.

BK: To the who?

DL: I was appointed by the mayor as special assistant for education in that first administration.

BK: Okay.**DL:** So I was one of the many special assistants.

BK: One of many.

DL: One of many.

BK: Me, too. So, that was the first time that you came in, was sometime in '79?

DL: Yeah.

BK: Yeah. Okay. You were advising him on all matters relating to education?

DL: Education, yeah.

BK: At all levels, not just K through twelve? [Kindergarten through 12th grade].

DL: No. K through twelve, and at that point the university was coming – the three independent colleges and universities were coming together as the University of the District of Columbia [UDC]. So, that was the beginning of that coming together. And I think Marion had a view for how the university should go. And I had a context for that, having grown up in New York City, which has, as most people know, an extensive – just like California, New York State, obviously, has a state university system, but New York City also has a city university in which each of the boroughs has a four-year college, and then there were junior colleges. That system has expanded since I went to school, but at that point, there were five senior colleges and a number of junior colleges. And the concept for the city university had always been that residents of the district of the city would have that as an option. It was a low-cost, high-quality educational system. And I think that was certainly one of the systems that Marion looked at in thinking about UDC and how it would be shaped, and what it would offer residents of the District of Columbia.

BK: Now the mayor had direct responsibility for crafting how it would be, or was it necessary to have legislation?

DL: There was legislation that brought the three college and universities together, but beyond that, it really was going to take – the formulation was going to have to come from the board. And the university had a board, and Marion was very much involved and engaged in that activity.

BK: Yeah, he appointed the board with the advice and consent of the council, of course.

DL: Right, and had a very real commitment to that. So for him, it wasn't a hands-off activity. It wasn't a point and go, do whatever you think. It was a point and, "I'm going to

continue to be very engaged in this activity.” And education was always very important for him, and that’s why he initially had a special assistant for education.

BK: Well, now, how long did you remain as a special assistant? Because after that you went over –

DL: To the Department of Human Services [DHS].

BK: That’s what I thought.

DL: And actually, that position ended when I stopped filling that position. And it was – I won’t say it was just based on my recommendation, but it certainly was my recommendation. And part of that came from the fact that we did have an elected school board, and it was an independent agency. And so people probably won’t remember it any longer, but at that point, the tension between the mayor’s office and an independent agency was just really an ongoing challenge.

BK: That’s very euphemistic of you.

DL: And Marion, having been on the school board and having known a lot of the players, he was – and he did that in every realm, but certainly, in education, he was known to pick up the phone and call people. So I mean, the tension just got really crazy. But beyond that, the kind of hands-on approach that he wanted to take with education, not only higher education but K through twelve, was something he really couldn’t do with an independent agency and an elected school board in which, given that the district was just in its early stages, people who were elected to the school board were always eyeing the city council and the mayor’s office as a place they could go next. And so that built in – that added another layer of contention as we looked at public policy issues, which was the broader question. So we had that going on. And you couldn’t

really make important headway without having control of the school system, and so my recommendation – well, that was one issue. The other issue was, education was much broader than DC Public Schools and UDC. I mean, as we got into it and started to really engage around the issue of education, it became clear that there were other pieces of it that were hanging out in a host of different agencies, DHS being one of them, but they were all over other places.

BK: Such as?

DL: Well, the district gets a lot of state education money that didn't necessarily go to UDC or any of the pieces of UDC, and didn't always go to DC Public Schools. Some of it went to an education office that sat inside DHS. For some reason, historically it somehow fell in there, and that's where the money went. Vocational education went to the Department of Labor. So there were pieces of education money that states get, and the District of Columbia, for all intents and purposes, was dealt with as a state, particularly with regard to federal dollars, that went all over the place.

And as we started to sit down and look at it and start to think about what should we be doing as the District of Columbia around education, and what should be the model, and how should we offer opportunities, and what happens after you graduate from high school, and where do you go, and all of that, the question about how do you bring all that together in some cohesive way so that you actually are able to play out what you think is important about public policy and about what happens in the city, you couldn't really do. One, the special assistant just really didn't have any power to do all of that. Two, the mayor had control over some of the dollars but not all of the dollars, so you really needed to rethink how you did that.

One of the things we thought about, and ultimately came about, was a State Office of Education, which has now bloomed into a whole host of other things. But, at least initially, the thought was, at a minimum, that office should start to bring together some of this money that was coming into the city that was sitting in all of these different places so that at least we all knew where it was, what it was, its amounts, what it was for, and how best to coordinate it and how best to set up, to establish some kind of overall cohesive approach and mission with regard to what those dollars do, and hopefully coordinate them with some of the other things that were going on – some of those that needed to relate to higher education and postsecondary, some of those that were related more pre-K [pre-kindergarten] kinds of activities – pre-K to twelve activities.

So that was the initial thought, and then that office grew over time. So it made sense to me to end the whole notion of a special assistant and move to this other notion of a state office, and then bring in some folks who were doing some of that work and start to coordinate those activities.

BK: So when you went over to DHS, you were put in charge of that office, or pulling that office together?

DL: No. They ultimately set up that State Office of Education. It took a little while, because they had to bring the funds together, and then they had to pull people out of different agencies and bring that together, so that took a while.

BK: But you were doing it?

DL: So I did some of it, and then I just left. I ceased being a part of the mayor's office and moved to the Department of Human Services, because I wanted to do some other kinds of

things in the administration, and I realized, at that point, that it was time to let some other folks take over the education.

BK: What did you do with DHS when you moved in?

DL: Over there, there was, and continues to be multiple – well, less now, but there was a major class action lawsuit against the District of Columbia related to its foster care system. They needed a manager for the city's piece of that and asked me to take that on and deal with the lawyers in that case, and also to make sure that the city complied with the requirements of the class action suit. And part of that was there were 500 youngsters that were identified in foster care who the court required to have full-scale testing and, based on that, to address some of the issues around placement, and a whole host of other issues. So I took that on, and we brought in folks to do the evaluations. We brought everything current and up-to-date, and that ultimately led to where the Department of Human Services was going in terms of foster care, because it just needed a major overhaul. And the ability to deal with a class action suit ultimately led us in a direction in terms of looking at foster care and what it ought to be doing overall, because the 500 children were really just the tip of the iceberg. They really just highlighted some of the inadequacies that we were dealing with in that department, and really said that there were a number of things that needed to happen in terms of training of staff, in terms of developing additional resources, in terms of looking at more rapid placement of youngsters out of foster care and into adoptions or back into their original biological families, looked at resources in the community to support these families either that didn't exist or that we had not engaged in a way that allowed them to really support these

families. So it said all of those things, and so that was the job that I took on. And so I was brought into the actual foster care part of the agency.

BK: Was the lawsuit during the Walter Washington administration, or did it come up –

DL: Yes, it did. Yes, it was pre-Marion. It was already full-fledged.

BK: When we came into office –

DL: Yes, it was there. It was full-fledged.

BK: There was a court order?

DL: There was a court order. It had been violated. The court was up in arms. There had been multiple issues around the court and foster care.

BK: That was a challenge for you. Good thing you were a lawyer as well as everything else.

DL: So people were not happy with us, not in the least. I think what was important, though, was a recognition, both by the court and by the advocates for these children, that we had a commitment to change the system. Initially, the good faith is, get the work done that the court said get done. So we did that, just to get that out of the way and get it done. But the more important piece – and that's when we actually brought some of the advocates into the agency both as consultants but many just because they were committed to this issue – was to just kind of sit down and say, "Okay. If what we're doing is not working, and we recognize it isn't, how do we begin to change the system?" And so a number of them were willing to work with us around that, because a lot of that was going on around the country. I mean, we weren't the only jurisdiction that was having difficulty with how we dealt with foster care and adoption systems, and that, unfortunately, is still true today. Everybody's doing better, but we still need to do lots better. I mean, the major issues around transitioning, so the children who leave who

don't, for any number of reasons, wind up either back in their own families or get adopted, who grow up in that system, when they transition, they tend to move into poverty and unemployment and homelessness, and it is just a disaster.

BK: Yeah. It's eighteen, isn't it?

DL: Yeah. But I think they sometimes make it to twenty-one. But even if they stretch it out to twenty-one, there are very few families that actually let children go at age twenty-one. I mean, in a biological family, you're getting support all the way along, maybe even later in some instances, but certainly through age twenty-one and beyond. So that transition issue continues to be – and what we do with adolescents in foster care who are not in families. And very often, if they're not in families before adolescence, they don't wind up in families afterwards, because that's one of the hardest times to deal with youngsters, and so you really have to have special skill sets and a real commitment to be able to do that. And so, unfortunately, many of those youngsters wind up in group homes or other settings. And so how do you support them and how do you provide those resources?

So anyway, all of that, some of which continues to be true, but was definitely part of what we struggled with at that point. And we had a good group of folk who were committed to and had worked with children's services as advocates and a whole host of other things who were both inside and outside. And I think part of the things that we learned in the Marion administration was, many of us had been on the outside kind of banging on doors and being very unhappy and advocating in many, many ways. And then we came inside and realized it's really difficult to take systems and change them. What helps, in addition to the commitment of the people inside, is still having people on the outside who kind of hold your feet to the fire, not because you forget why you're there, but because you just can get overwhelmed by the many different pulls and

pushes that get created inside. And so it always helps to have those voices outside that continue to keep you focused and also bring resources to the table. And many of them did, and it made the difference in our ability to really make some change.

BK: I remember Marion had a meeting with the women's organizations very shortly after his inaugural, and, amongst other things, he said, "You know, just because you've got a friend in the mayor's office now doesn't mean that you stop advocating."

DL: You stop advocating, you stop fighting, yeah.

BK: I want you to help me get things done, and I want you to force me to do things.

DL: Yeah, exactly. And keep my feet to the fire and keep me focused. I think it's important.

BK: Yeah. But I mean, not all elected officials take that point of view.

DL: I think very few. I think that's one piece of it. I think the other piece of it is, and we've seen this both in the national environment and locally, is when people get their person elected, they think they've done their job. "I'm done," and they walk away, not recognizing that you have to continue. You may want to do it differently than you did previously, but you have to stay in the game, and you have to keep fighting.

BK: Right. So now how long did you stay at DHS?

DL: Oh, it felt like a lifetime. I think I was there about three or four years.

BK: So that would take you to about '83? '82 was his reelection.

DL: Yeah, okay. Right at the reelection, I left. At the end of his first term was the end of my term in government. Yeah, so it was around there.

BK: Did you continue your relationship with Marion in terms of friendship and advocacy and so forth, or did you move on to other things?

DL: I was in the private sector working, and did a lot of work –

BK: Also in education policy?

DL: With education and human services activities. I worked for a consulting firm that did mental health, and actually did a lot of systems support to different states around foster care and similar issues. But the point I guess I'd like to make here is that you never left Marion Barry.

BK: No, you never escaped. Most of us never wanted to.

DL: So it really didn't matter that I was no longer working for him. So the friendship and knowing him and being engaged around a number of issues –

BK: And the phone calls saying, "I need you to do something for me."

DL: And the phone calls. Right, exactly. It had absolutely nothing to do with the fact that I know – I think, at one point, not realizing the person, I think I even said that to him, "You know, I don't work for you anymore." And I think there was this silence, and then he went on as if, "Why is she saying that? What's the point?" So to answer your question, I left, but so what? And just to kind of bring it current, I currently sit on a board in which the board is appointed by the mayor and –

BK: Which one?

DL: It's the DC Health Benefit Exchange. It's the implementation of the Affordable Care Act and the State Marketplaces. And so I sit on that board, and when Marion was alive and on the city council – and the city council has to confirm, and so he saw my name. And one of the things that we do, all boards do, is to meet with the city council and to apprise them of what you're doing, and we have budget presentations as well. And so I walked into his office – and people read your resume but they don't really read it or realize that the years that you said were in the mayor's office who was there at the time. And so I

walked into his office with a number of other board members who didn't know Marion and didn't know I knew him. And as soon as I walked in he said, "Diane Lewis." And he was off on his conversation, and they looked at me as if, "You know him?" "Yes, yes I have a nodding acquaintance with Marion Barry."

And he said, "You know, you were in a hearing the other day." And I also am a consultant, so I did some advocacy work for people with disabilities and providers of services with disabilities, and so I also did a number of hearings in which I presented and advocated on those issues. And he said, "You know, I was watching the hearing, and I saw you present the other day." He said, "I'm watching you." "I know, Marion. I know. I know." So you never really left him, you just thought you did.

BK: You were always going to be part of his universe.

DL: Always, always, always.

BK: Yeah. He's sadly missed. Sadly missed.

DL: He is.

BK: Is there anything else you'd like to add about him and your relationship and the role that he played in the city and so forth?

DL: Yeah. I think the perspective he had and the people he brought in in that – particularly in the first administration. And, obviously, as administrations went along, other skill sets and knowledge bases were needed. But in that first group were many who had civil rights backgrounds and who brought a perspective around a city that really was new to politics. The elections were new, voting was new, and engaging around issues and getting a government to actually respond to your needs and requirements was new. And

so he had a commitment to that, and he did that initially from the outside. And when he got on the inside, he still went to those groups, or they came to him.

But that dialogue, that conversation, continued. He may not have always played it out in a way that made everyone happy, and that's okay because that's what happens in government. That's a reality of democracy, it's kind of messy but it works. But that constant tension and that constant making sure that there were voices, and particularly voices of groups in parts of the city that went unnoticed and unheard, and, in some instances, appeared to not – no one really cared what happened, he was there always. Just a quick story. During the time that I was the special assistant for education, the teachers went on strike.

BK: Oh, gosh. I remember that.

DL: And we had daily meetings around the status, what was going on. And let's be clear, he couldn't stop the strike as the mayor. It had to be – they were negotiating with the school board, and that was not going well. We were giving him constant updates. Every day we went out to different schools to see what was going on. We went to every part of the city. And he was in constant conversations with the school board, with the superintendent, with the teachers' union around how to resolve that issue. And ultimately, he probably was the important reason that that got resolved, because on a Friday night, Marion Barry called everybody together and said, "We're going to settle this. We are going to come up with an agreement everybody can live with, because children cannot be out of school. That just cannot happen." And so we as a staff organized that meeting and set it up, and people negotiated until they got that issue resolved.

BK: Lock the door and don't let them leave.

DL: Yes, absolutely. So there's a narrative out there about him that does not give a full and complete picture. And for none of us is there a full and complete picture, but I think it's important to state that there was more to him than what is currently put out there. I mean, Walter Washington certainly is very important, but Marion begins to kind of change the culture in the District of Columbia around politics, around how we run government, around what government is here to do and why, and what the exchange and interaction is between government and the people who are served.

BK: Absolutely.

DL: And I think that's important, and I think that continues to this day, and we see it play out in lots of different ways, including the current election where we got results that people didn't expect. And it's because there were a lot of people down on the ground, kind of organizing and having these conversations, and some people were listening and some people weren't, and you see that result.

BK: You're talking about the recent city council?

DL: Yeah. And so there's a lot going on here, and that is, in part, because of Marion.

BK: I absolutely agree with you. Thank you very much.

DL: You're more than welcome.

[Begin diane_lewisPart2]

BK: I want to resume our interview for just a minute, because after I shut it off, we were talking about the problem of having come into government that was dominated with tenured civil servants who were left over from the time when the District government was an agency of the federal government. Would you tell me what your experience was with how we dealt with that problem?

DL: Well, as I had said, I was in the Department of Human Services, and having come out of the federal government with so many people, we were beginning to transition into a DC personnel system. But before we got there, people still had huge amounts of federal benefits and rights, and so being able to move them out of a position, being able to get them out of an agency when you needed them out was extremely difficult, and that was true throughout the government. And many of the people who were not helpful and were resistant to change in many of the agencies found their way to the Department of Human Services. So while other agencies may have been able to get on with their new mission and their new dynamic and new requirements, the Department of Human Services was weighed down in many respects by all of these people. And so we had to come up with different strategies and approaches to begin to move them out of the agency and to help folks to retire and to make other career choices that would permit us to really get the agency to move forward. Currently, almost every piece of what was DHS is now a separate agency, but then DHS was both social services, it was health, it was mental health, so it was a huge agency. And not only moving people, but getting all those pieces of the agency to talk to themselves, talk to each other and have a coordinated approach, particularly around issues in which physical health and mental health and social services came together, like foster care, but a host of others, it was just an incredible effort. So the struggle continued for a number of years as we tried to move people who had these incredible federal rights.

BK: Do you remember who was the head of the Office of Human Services?

DL: The Department of Human Services?

BK: Of human resources, the personnel?

DL: Oh, the personnel? I don't remember who that was at the time.

BK: Was it José Gutierrez?

DL: No, he comes – well, he's an appointee of Marion, so there's somebody before him, but he comes in as a result of Marion. Marion appoints him. And of course, we needed legislation and to develop a new personnel system that both incorporated some of the federal rights – because again, we still have a huge workforce that was basically federal for a very long time, and so they get those rights locked in. And then you build on top of that the DC personnel system which transitions some folks, and then, of course, for new employees, they start in a new system. And so it starts to give greater flexibility to managers and supervisors and directors of the department in terms of how to run the departments and how to restructure them, which was desperately needed at the time.

BK: That's wonderful, because I knew that that was an issue, and I hadn't interviewed anybody yet who could speak firsthand about what it was like.

DL: Oh yes.

BK: Thank you.

[End of Interview]